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ABSTRACT

Vocational Education (VE) has long been recognized for its "hands-on" approach to education and ability to demonstrate a connection between school and employment. The consensus of the literature is that VE facilitates student skill development, retention in school, and employment. According to the research, reducing the dropout rate is the most common outcome of VE for at-risk populations. VE has also been demonstrated to raise the employment and earnings of at-risk youth and adults. Programs targeted to a specific segment of the at-risk population or a specific area of need have been especially successful in increasing employment and earnings of program completers. The research has also shown that skill development (academic and vocational) is only one factor impeding the continued education and employment of at-risk populations. To improve their status in life, disadvantaged individuals need vocational programs to connect them to the support services such as the following: assessment, counseling, mentoring, resume writing, referral, placement in full-time positions, follow-up, and continued educational opportunities. Employers, mentors, and other community members, including parents, can augment VE by helping at-risk persons bridge the gap between their current status and realization of their life and work potential. (MN)

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Is Vocational Education Making a Difference for High-Risk Populations? Myths and Realities

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Myths and REALITIES
by Bettina Lankard Brown 1996
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Is Vocational Education Making a Difference for High-Risk Populations?

Any number of vocational education programs have been targeted to solve the education and employment problems of the nation's high-risk populations—the dropout prone, persons with disabilities, educationally and economically disadvantaged persons, and so forth. Some have realized successful outcomes; others have not. This publication examines vocational education's role in the success of high-risk populations.

Reducing the dropout rate is the most common outcome of vocational education for at-risk populations

Although in-school retention is a goal of vocational education programs targeted to at-risk youth, it is not the most significant outcome. Data from the evaluation of a 3-year demonstration program funded by the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act reflects a broader perspective on program success. In summarizing the outcomes of the 12 evaluated projects, Hayward and Tallmadge (1995) report that only 4 of the 12 showed a significant reduction in numbers of dropouts. The most successful outcome was the improved school performance of program participants. Ten of the 12 projects showed an increase in students' grade point averages; 7 of the 12 showed a reduction in number of courses failed.

In a review of literature regarding the impact of vocational education on student retention, Hill and Bishop (1993) acknowledge that, although there is some evidence that vocational education programs and approaches have succeeded in keeping students in school, other research showed that vocational education enhanced student retention only when it included other components such as work experience.

Coordinating vocational education programs with programs that address the special conditions that place individuals at risk may provide better outcomes than programs solely devoted to vocational education. The Comprehensive Bilingual Vocational Education for Refugee Youth program is one example. Serving youth with limited English proficiency (LEP), this 2-year program provides students with a half-day of vocational training with bilingual assistance and 3 hours per week of life skills training. As part of the vocational component, bilingual members of the business community visit the classroom, talk with students about work in their fields, and take them to their places of work. In the first year of operation, the LEP dropout rate in the metropolitan area dropped from 35% to 0. In the two counties served by the program, the dropout rate went from 20% to 4% (ibid).

Vocational programs raise the employment and earnings of at-risk youth and adults

Not all programs achieve the goal of enhancing the employability of at-risk persons,. Successful outcomes depend on the extent to which the programs meet the needs of those at risk. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act and the Job Training Partnership Act programs, for example, have had little success in raising employment or earnings of disadvantaged out-of-school youth (U.S. Department of Labor 1995). One of the reasons for this may be that employment in today's highly competitive, highly skilled workplace requires levels of educational achievement that these populations have not realized.

Many at-risk persons lack even the most basic academic skills, not to mention the higher order thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving skills required in today's workplace. They require programs that can help them develop good communication and social skills, think creatively, work well in teams, and take responsibility for their own learning and advancement. Vocational programs that contain formal ongoing coordination of academic and vocational content are more likely to prepare students with these skills, which is why the integration of academic and vocational education is increasingly recognized as a critical component of model programs for at-risk populations (Adler et al. 1996; Hayward and Tallmadge 1995; Wołoszyk 1996).

Programs that are targeted to a specific segment of the at-risk population or to a specific area of need are more successful at increasing employment and earnings of program completers. New York State's New Ventures Program, for example, is designed to help low-income women become economically self-sufficient through employment in higher-paying, nontraditional occupations. The program uses career exploration and job skills training to help participants develop the necessary skills for such employment. The 21-24 week program has realized the following outcomes for those who completed the program (Zhao et al. 1996):

- 60 percent were employed, most within 3 months
- 78 percent were employed in nontraditional occupations
- 69 percent were employed in jobs directly related to their training
- 60 percent of those employed reported earning more than $10 per hour

Model vocational education programs for at-risk populations focus solely on skill development

Skill development (academic and vocational) is only one factor impeding the continued education and employment of at-risk populations. Teenage pregnancy and early parenting responsibilities; alcohol and drug dependency; emotional/psychological disorders; poverty; crime, violence and physical abuse; and dysfunctional family situations are just some of the other conditions that place persons at risk. Persons with these disadvantages need vocational programs to connect them to the support services that will help them improve their status in life.

Wołoszyk (1996) warns that limiting program focus to dropout prevention, for example, is a barrier to vocational programs serving at-risk and out-of-school youth. He contends that vocational education programs for at-risk populations should focus on reintegrating with the existing system. Because students leave school for many reasons, they need academic, occupational, and social supports that complement vocational education as a remedy to the dropout problem. These supports could include attention to personal development and social skills, work experience, mentoring, and other efforts targeted to the problems that place individuals in the high-risk category.

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The Benton Harbor Workforce Skill Development Program includes two instructional components: a Job Skills Education Program and a Life Skills Seminar. However, in addition to instruction, participants receive a variety of services: assessment, counseling, mentoring, resume writing, referral service, placement in full-time positions, 90-day follow-up, and continued educational opportunities. Program outcomes for the first year were positive (Taylor-Dunlop et al. 1997, p. 1):

> As of October 1996, following the first year of operation, 182 participants had completed the 12-week program with 132 placed in jobs that have average wages of about $7.00 per hour with reasonable fringe benefits. The work retention is about 80 percent and some have now been employed over one year. Many are recent high-school graduates from at-risk environments who were unable to get jobs before participating in the program.

For the Common Good: Building Linkages for At-Risk Families in Ohio is an innovative project that coordinates the services of multiple agencies that serve at risk populations. This project, initiated as a result of the Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA), focuses on strengthening both state and local linkages of programs and services designed to serve Ohio FSA program participants. It involves collaboration of the Ohio Departments of Education, Human Services, Development, and Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services; the Job Training Partnership of Ohio; and the Ohio Board of Regents. The benefit of the collaboration is that the team of agencies is better able to make things happen. When one agency meets a roadblock to providing services to at-risk persons, another agency on the team can step up to offer assistance. For example, when the adult basic and literacy education director needed classroom space that would be readily accessible to JOBS clients, federal Housing and Urban Development officials issued a waiver allowing a unit in the public housing complex where the clients lived to be used for class (Imel 1994).

Summary

A general consensus of vocational education's role in serving at-risk populations as reported in the literature is one of facilitating student skill development, retention in school, and employment. By itself, vocational education cannot solve all the education and employment problems of the wide array of high-risk persons. However, its integration with other programs and connection with the community affords a greater potential for program success.

The East San Gabriel Valley School-to-Work Program joins in partnership 7 school districts, 4 community colleges, 3 California State University campuses, and over 300 businesses for the purpose of putting career preparation education for students into real-life context. Over 40 community service agencies, also involved in the project, provide support services to high-risk youth and offer workaday instruction and contextual classroom instruction. The project's research findings revealed positive outcomes for the treatment group (Adler et al. 1995, pp. 17-19.):

	Treatment	Nontreatment
Graduated from high school	90%	65%
Attended college	65%	45%
Employed	87%	64%
Have upwardly mobile jobs	50% of those employed	

Mentors are another way to extend students' connections to the community. "Mentoring at-risk students has become one of the fastest growing and frequently used strategies in programs for at-risk youth" (Woloszyk 1996, p. 23). In analyzing its dropout prevention and recovery programs, the Illinois State Board of Education found that "programs that included a mentoring component were successful with 83 percent of the at-risk students and 70 percent of the retrieved dropouts" (ibid.). The advantage of mentoring as a technique for helping at-risk populations is that it can be used with a wide range of individuals represented in the "at-risk" classification. Mentors give at-risk individuals someone with whom to connect.

Vocational education has long been acclaimed for its "hands-on" approach to education, for its ability to demonstrate a connection between what is learned in school and what is required for employment. Employers, mentors, and other community members, including parents, can augment vocational programs by helping at-risk persons bridge the gap between their current status and the realization of their life and work potential.

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